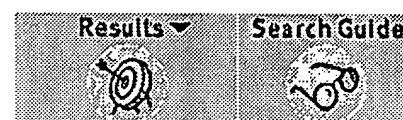


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There's a Bright Light and a Sendmail at the end of the dark spam tunnel

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Abstract:

A commentary discusses spam, defining it as unwanted e-mail of all kinds evading blanket prohibitions. There are 3 things that should be done about spam: 1. Reduce anonymity on the Internet. 2. Get better at filtering e-mail. 3. Pay electronic postage to compensate competing carriers of evolving e-mail.

Full Text:

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PAM IS IN THE EYE of the beholder.

Like the time I received e-mail inviting me to Earth Day. Being pro-pollution, I wrote back asking them to stop spamming me. Earth Day responded by saying their invitation was not spam because, well, they're nonprofit.

Some see spam simply as unsolicited bulk electronic advertising - a clear violation of some part of the Constitution. But I see spam as unwanted e-mail of all kinds, in many shades of gray, evading blanket prohibitions.

Advertising facilitates economic, political, and social activity, so we can't just criminalize unsolicited bulk e-mail. The growth of I-commerce depends on our doing something, but not too much, about spam. Unfortunately, zealots are threatening spam legislation on a par with our recently overturned decency legislation.

There are three things we should be doing about spam, none of which will eliminate it entirely.

First, we should reduce anonymity on the Internet. Anonymity has important uses, but it shouldn't be so convenient for polluters of our e-mail streams.

Second, we should be getting better at filtering our e-mail. The solution for indecent Web pages is not prohibition, but better filtering - ditto for e-mail.

And third, we should be paying electronic postage to compensate competing carriers of evolving e-mail. Postage motivates mailers to focus on appreciative recipients. Sadly, e-postage requires micromoney, the deployment of which is probably a decade away.

In the meantime, there's progress on filtering. New companies, including Sendmail and Bright Light, are getting us us two-thirds the way into spam-filtering heaven.

Sendmail is a 17-year-old start-up in Emeryville, Calif. At its recent inception, Sendmail boasted an installed base of about 750,000 or 75 percent of Internet e-mail servers.

Sendmail's founder is Eric Allman, who has been leading the Sendmail consortium (<http://www.sendmail.org>) since 1981. His company's product, sendmail, is the SMTP software that has been carrying most Internet mail ever since. Allman has now joined with CEO Greg Olson to continue offering sendmail as the free "open source" mail software that it has been for 17 years, plus now in commercially supported for-profit binary versions (<http://www.sendmail.com>).

Sendmail 8.9 comes with 13 new anti-spam tools. For example, mail relaying is now off by default. Network managers can choose to forward the e-mail of specified users, but not anonymous spam.

The sendmail release can also validate the sources of incoming e-mail by looking them up through the Internet's DNS. This helps thwart spammers who fake source addresses to dodge unsubscribe requests, penalizing them with disconnection by their ISPs or, in some states, litigation for theft of services.

Olson estimates that sendmail 8.9 can be used to cut spam by as much as 90 percent at e-mail sites with determined and astute network administrators.

Bright Light (<http://www.brightlight.com>) is a new company working with Sendmail and other mail software suppliers. CEO Sunil Paul, formerly of America Online, sees spam as a mutating virus.

Senders of bulk unsolicited e-mail change their attacks as measures are taken against them. Bright Light will offer a service that gathers alerts from ISPs, your companies, and its own probe email accounts. When a new attack is detected, say by the receipt of unsolicited mail at a probe mailbox, humans will analyze the attack and distribute new filtering parameters to mail servers.

Sendmail offers ubiquitous spam filters, and Bright Light offers a service for tuning them. But the next big anti-spam step remains to be taken. Internet users should have tools to filter out what they individually behold as spam.

Users should be able to keep lists of senders from whom they will or will not accept e-mail. And after reading e-mail, I'd like to hit a forward, reply, file, delete, or **spam button** in my e-mail client. If my eye beholds **spam**, hitting the **spam button** would file it for use in future prosecutions, ask my server to filter all future e-mail from that sender, and notify the sender, using a new mandatory anti-spam protocol, that I am to be removed from that list.

Is the Internet Engineering Task Force refining such a spam control protocol? After it becomes mandatory, I promise not to use it against too many of you, mostly just those who still insist the Monty Hall Paradox is a 50-50 proposition.

[Author note]

Internet pundit Bob Metcalfe invented Ethernet in 1973 and founded  3Com in 1979. Send e-mail to metcalfe@idg.net or see <http://www.idg.net/metcalfe>.

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